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TAGS: [EAGR](#) [EAID](#) [KSCA](#) [TBIO](#) [KSTH](#) [WHO](#) [AMED](#) [PREL](#) [CY](#)

SUBJECT: CYPRUS: UPDATE ON AVIAN INFLUENZA PREPAREDNESS

REFS: (A) NICOSIA 50 (B) NICOSIA 34 (C) 05 NICOSIA 1914

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¶1. (U) Summary: Because Cyprus is only 45 miles from the Turkish shore and on the flight path for thousands of migratory birds, Cypriot officials continue to believe that it is only a matter of time before Avian Influenza is found on the island. The outbreak in Turkey has redoubled efforts (and fears), prompting both the GoC and Turkish Cypriot authorities to introduce new measures. In the past two weeks, the Turkish Cypriot authorities have cancelled the hunting season, prohibited the use of areas around ponds for recreational use, and are actively destroying all poultry not kept in pens or under cover. The Greek Cypriots have banned duck hunting (but not hunting of other birds) and have begun checking every vehicle coming from the area administered by Turkish Cypriots, leading to long lines at the checkpoints -- a move many see as politically motivated. Several contacts have suggested that the GoC is likely to close the checkpoints if an AI outbreak occurs in the north.

¶2. (SBU) Coordination between the GoC and the Turkish Cypriot authorities remains limited, although the USAID-financed, UNDP-administered ACT program continues to host regular unofficial meetings of the respective veterinary services. In an effort to spur similar cooperation between the health services, ACT has invited experts from both sides to attend a briefing February 1 to be conducted by a leading WHO AI official. The European Commission is sending two AI veterinarian specialists to provide assistance to the Turkish Cypriot community the week of February 13. End summary.

¶3. (SBU) There have been no confirmed cases of avian influenza in birds or humans on the island. Given the recent outbreak in neighboring Turkey and Cyprus's position on the pathway of two major bird migratory patterns, Cypriot officials continue to believe that an outbreak is only a question of time. Recent press reports that a Pakistani girl had contracted AI in the Turkish Cypriot community turned out to be false (reftel A). On January 22, the Greek Cypriot press reported that several hundred chickens had died in the north on a

single farm, suggesting this could be linked to bird flu. Tests, however, came back negative and it appears that the birds were infant chicks that had been left out in a rainstorm by an inexperienced farmer. While the vet services on both sides continue to monitor farms and lakes and examine dead birds for AI, no cases of AI have been identified.

Increased Measures by the Turkish Cypriot Community

¶4. (U) On January 18, the Turkish Cypriot veterinary service briefed the diplomatic community on additional steps that it had implemented in the north since the death of the first AI victim in Turkey. (See reftels for previous measures). In the past two weeks, the Turkish Cypriots leadership has:

-- cancelled the hunting season for small birds that was scheduled to begin January 15;

-- ordered all poultry, as well as all water and feed for poultry, to be placed in enclosed areas to prevent interaction with migratory birds. Earlier this week, the veterinary service began destroying any poultry found outside, without any compensation to the owner. (Bird owners who comply with the ruling and have poultry that must be culled due to an outbreak will be compensated.) According to the "Chief Veterinarian Officer," officials had already confiscated and killed several hundred otherwise healthy birds.

-- prohibited the use of all ponds for recreational use (because of the presence of migratory birds). Fishing in or picknicking near ponds is banned.

-- reinvigorated their public outreach campaign with training held for farmers and medical staff as well as pamphlets distributed to schools and newspapers on how to avoid contracting the disease. A 24-hour hotline was set up to facilitate reports of dead birds or of poultry found outside of pens.

-- placed health inspectors at all ports. Anyone suspected of being ill is sent immediately to a hospital.

-- renewed the ban, begun this fall, on all imports from all countries of raw poultry, live birds and bird products (including feathers). Only poultry that has been heat-treated at a minimum of 70 degrees Celsius will be allowed to enter north Cyprus. (note: the Turkish Cypriot community does not import any poultry or poultry products from the U.S. The press has reported Turkish Cypriot poultry farmers claiming a drop in sales of between 75 to 90 percent.)

-- identified areas where culled birds could be buried according to EU regulations. Turkish Cypriot authorities have already acquired protective gear, disinfectants, CO2 chambers, and a mobile incinerator for this purpose. (The incinerator was provided by the USAID funded ACT program).

-- passed a list of additional materials needed to ACT for possible procurement. ACT will review the list and provide additional equipment and supplies as appropriate.

¶5. (SBU) A Turkish Cypriot veterinary official reported that his office had completed and was implementing an AI contingency plan that consciously mirrored the plan prepared by the RoC veterinary service. (Note: The RoC veterinary service had informally shared its plan with the Turkish Cypriots in late 2005. In November, together with officials from the UK and DG Enlargement, post passed an additional copy of the RoC text to Turkish Cypriot "PM" Soyer and urged him to prepare and implement a compatible plan to facilitate intra-island cooperation. End note.)

¶6. (U) Turkish Cypriot veterinary officers noted that they were regularly conducting Elisa testing on dead birds, although the tests could not identify the subtype of AI. Any positive results were sent to the Turkish national laboratories in Izmir or Istanbul for further analysis. Birds that tested negative were discarded. The "Under Secretary" of the "Ministry" of Health added that an Avian Influenza Coordination and Monitoring Committee chaired by the "Minister of Health" had been established late fall and was meeting at least twice a month.

Additional RoC Measures

¶7. (U) The GoC has also taken some additional steps to address the AI threat (for previous GoC actions, please see reftels). Duck hunting has been banned and customs and police have increased inspections at the checkpoints leading from the Turkish Cypriot community. Previously the authorities checked only one out of every 10 to 20 vehicles crossing the Green Line into the south; now every vehicle and every individual is being checked, leading to long lines and delays at the checkpoint. IDs are being checked twice, and for the first time, information on Greek Cypriots crossing over is being recorded. While it used to take up to 30 minutes to cross south through the Ayios Demetrios checkpoint in Nicosia at rush hour, drivers are now reporting waits up to two to three hours. The GoC has also established new checkpoints outside of Pyla and Strovolia in order to inspect people/vehicles transiting the Green Line through the UK Sovereign Base Areas (SBA). Previously, inspections by the UK base authorities were deemed sufficient. In addition, the GoC has announced plans to introduce carpets treated with disinfectant, through which all cars/people will be required to drive/walk.

¶8. (U) Responding to complaints that the new measures appear to be disrupting relations between the two communities and are aimed to discourage Greek Cypriots from visiting the north, the GoC has argued that it is merely enforcing the EU's Green Line Regulation. This regulation requires the GoC to "carry out checks on all persons crossing the line... to detect and prevent any threat to public security..." It also requires that "All persons shall undergo at least one check to establish their identity," something that was not being fully enforced up until now.

Concern GoC Could Close Checkpoint

¶9. (SBU) There is also growing concern that the GoC could close the checkpoints should avian influenza be found in the north. Last week President of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry Manthos Mavrommatis warned us that pressure for closing the checkpoints in case of an AI outbreak was growing. On January 17, AKEL Euro MEP Adamos Admaou specifically advocated this and called on Greek Cypriots to immediately limit their movements to the Turkish Cypriot community because of AI health concerns. President Papadopoulos denied to the press that the GoC has any plan to close the checkpoints, but noted that this could not be ruled out. Meanwhile, the Turkish Cypriots have no intent to close the checkpoint (and put out of work the 5,000 plus Turkish Cypriots who work in the south) should an outbreak occur in the government-controlled area. (COMMENT: Less charitable observers suspect hard-line elements within the GOC are looking for an excuse to shut the checkpoints as a way of pressuring the Turkish Cypriot community. One wryly noted to us the birds would not bother stopping at the Green Line if the checkpoints were closed. Many Turkish Cypriots cross south regularly for work, school, shopping and medical treatment. END COMMENT.)

Concern About Lack of Cooperation Between Communities

¶10. (SBU) The relative absence of cooperation between the

GoC and the Turkish Cypriot community remains a serious concern. While the USAID-funded, UNDP-administered ACT program is regularly hosting informal meetings between the two respective veterinary services, these meetings have been restricted to technical-level contacts.

Health officials from both sides have yet to meet. We also remain concerned about the lack of coordination between the veterinary and health authorities, especially in the Turkish Cypriot north. To try to overcome this, ACT has invited a WHO official to brief health and veterinary experts from both sides (as well as from the UK SBA) on February 1. The European Commission will also be sending veterinary, and possibly health, experts to visit the island (with special emphasis on the Turkish Cypriot community) the week of February 13.

Large Drop in Demand for Poultry

¶11. (U) Turkish Cypriot poultry farmers have reported a drop in poultry sales of between 75 to 90 percent in the north, according to the press. Sales of poultry in the south dropped 50 percent during the original AI panic in October and November, but had gradually recovered after people began to understand that eating cooked poultry was safe. Following the deaths in Turkey, a Greek Cypriot supermarket owner reported a slight drop of sales, around 10 percent, but nothing like the panic that had occurred earlier. U.S. exports of poultry products to Cyprus have historically been very limited. The U.S. exported less than \$100,000 in poultry products, mostly eggs, to the government-controlled area of Cyprus in 2004 and does not export any poultry products to the north.

Comment:

¶12. (SBU) The recent deaths in Turkey have finally brought home to Cypriot authorities the seriousness of a possible AI outbreak. This is especially true of the Turkish Cypriot authorities, who had been lagging behind in their preparations. Nevertheless, we still remain concerned that despite the advanced planning, a major outbreak would quickly overwhelm both sides' ability to adequately respond. We also remain concerned that petty political point-scoring will prevent any coordinated response or meaningful cooperation among the GoC and the Turkish Cypriot authorities. We will continue to encourage full implementation of the AI contingency plans as well as closer cooperation among experts from both communities.

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